



Mediation Musings: Awe

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"Ma," Déna's whispered voice came. He was in Switzerland—it sounded dire. This was going to be bad, I was sure. My son's voice came softer, calmer: "Mom, I'm standing on the top of a mountain, it's amazing. It's . . . I can't explain it, it's . . . let me FaceTime you so you can see." In the window of the phone, I could only see sun and white. He turned the phone, and I saw in his 30-year-old face something I hadn't seen since his childhood. A beatific smile, smooth forehead, wide eyes and something that looked like peacefulness. My son was struck by awe.

What is awe?

The usual definition of [awe](#) involves the person's awareness of *vastness*. The classic awe experience is that of the astronaut looking back at the Earth within the huge expanse of space and being astounded and emotionally overcome. It is also called the [overview effect](#). A person takes in their sense of amazement and wonder, and an emotional reaction occurs. Moments of awe can be profoundly moving, with many suggesting that their worldview can shift dramatically as a result. "[A]we contains two core characteristics, namely, perceived vastness and the need for accommodation; the powerful experience of awe forces individuals to adjust their mental structures to assimilate in the process of perceiving the vastness."

What is awe? "This emotional experience allows individuals to become more aware of their surroundings and to regard themselves as part of something larger which can reduce egocentric concerns and awareness of one's own insignificance." Along with the six core automatic emotions of anger, sadness, joy, fear, disgust and surprise, recent research points to awe being another emotion, more complex and less common.



Experiences of awe

Of course, as you begin looking for a concept, you discover it is all around you. That was my experience once I started to think about awe. Companies were referencing it; it was all over the media; I found articles mentioning the use of awe in schools and families. Here are some categories of awe-inspiring experiences according to [Strengthen Your Leadership with the Science of Awe](#) in the Wharton School leadership newsletter.

- Moral Beauty
- Collective Effervescence
- Nature
- Music
- Visual Design
- Transcendence
- Life and Death
- Big Ideas

I think back on moments where awe has found me—memories of nature, music, death and loss inspiring awe in me. More often, though, I have been awestruck by the actions of others, the kindness, creativity and profound actions of humanity by everyday people living their lives. People are truly amazing, and I am humbled regularly by the actions of others.

Religious institutions and spiritual practices are united in their focus on awe and wonder. As I review the awe landscape, it seems that lots of other parts of society have been focusing on awe. Even in politics and warfare, the idea of awe mixed with shock is widely discussed as folks try to keep up with the firehose of actions and declarations by the federal government. Awe as a tactical approach—hmm.

Awe as resilience

There are a few adjacent careers to our work as mediators within the larger field of conflict resolution. Diplomats are one, ombuds are another. We are related because we all help negotiations to flow smoothly and use creative means to help turn bad situations toward the good, if possible. Another related role is that of hostage negotiators; I admire them tremendously for their ability to stay calm under inordinate pressure and think clearly and with imagination. I'm pretty sure I couldn't do their job.

I was initially drawn to this article, "[Hostage Negotiator Resilience: A Phenomenological Study of Awe](#)," because I couldn't put the two pictures together in my mind: that of the stereotyped gritty, world-weary negotiator with lives in their hands, and the peaceful, childlike face of my son on the mountaintop. I thought, *One of these things is not like the other*.

I learned, though, that crisis hostage negotiators (CHN) work in well-oiled teams and they practice all the time. The study included equally divided men and women, and they ranged from 39 to 55 years old. It found that one broad area they practice constantly is building resilience and creating muscle memory to draw on when a crisis arises.

A major component of the [Crisis Hostage Negotiator's] strategy is to slow down the crisis incident in order to allow time for the person to vent their feelings (i.e., anger, frustration, sadness) and consider their current and future actions ([Van Hasselt et al., 2008](#)). In order to slow this process down, CHNs use skills which consists of active listening, empathy, rapport, and behavioral influence ([Van Hasselt et al., 2008](#)). Negotiators are also trained in a host of other areas to successfully navigate these highly stressful situations, such as, but not limited to, stress management, mindfulness, working with victims and families, and other aspects of mental health trainings ([Mullins, 2002](#)). Research by [Grubb et al. \(2019\)](#) have found that certain characteristics were viewed to be important qualities for a negotiator to possess in order to be successful with negotiations (i.e., empathic, demonstrating respect for another person, flexibility, law enforcement experience, patience, resiliency, compassionate, trustworthy, mental stamina, and insightfulness). As such, the negotiators' primary goal is to obtain the person's

cooperation and compliance without the additional use of the tactical/operations team ([Johnson et al., 2018](#)).¹

This study provided another perspective on resilience themes, referencing the work as bigger than the negotiators themselves, awe-producing moments when interacting with the perpetrator and others. Researchers walked participants through the process of “reflecting on awe experiences.” I was drawn in when reading profound and introspective quotes from the study participants. Themes such as curiosity, empathy, humility and gratitude emerged.

No, I hadn’t. I hadn’t thought about awe, and I think it’s a term that I don’t . . . Yeah. I didn’t use quite frequently, but now I will find myself probably paying attention to those moments that I have, just an internal reflection on, I think that’s awe. Yeah, so thank you for that. (CHN quoted from the above article).

Awe and conflict resolution

There’s something in all of this that might be instructive for those in the conflict resolution world. If hostage negotiators can be encouraged to broaden their view from the up-close intensity of the moments where they are engaged in what may be a life-or-death standoff—would this be helpful for mediators?

I thought about some of the best mediators I have known, observed or learned from. There was awe, right in the middle of their practice. I remember one mediator, long ago, telling me something like: *I think of myself with the whole world as my guide and with the mediation participants in the middle of this huge world. It helps to contextualize things, so I don’t get so carried away with myself or the details.* At the time I thought she was a bit whacky, but now as I consider this idea within the framework of awe, I can see that it was a method to bring in the vastness of awe inspiration and to not become so close to the messy conflict that she, as the mediator, couldn’t see the whole of the planet as the container.

Other model mediators talk about maintaining “the beginner’s mind” or “unending curiosity.” These seem to be practices that could leave open the possibility of awe within the mediation. We may not be looking back at the planet from space; here on the ground, we have to imagine the astounding beauty and unexpected peace of the moment when the conflict becomes resolved and disputants move on with their lives into a better future.

As conflict coaches, we find that awe can play a role for practitioners. I catch myself really awed by those individuals who work with coaches to make improvements in their conflict management repertoire. Those of us who work regularly with others in conflict might be well served by taking a moment to think about the work within a larger frame. The drop in the pond that ripples out, as a metaphor for our conflict resolution services, might be a way to access a small and significant sense of awe.

Articles mentioned here:

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2405844023024428#bib12>

<https://executiveeducation.wharton.upenn.edu/thought-leadership/wharton-at-work/2023/08/harness-the-science-of-awe/>

[Hostage negotiator resilience: A phenomenological study of awe - PMC](#)

